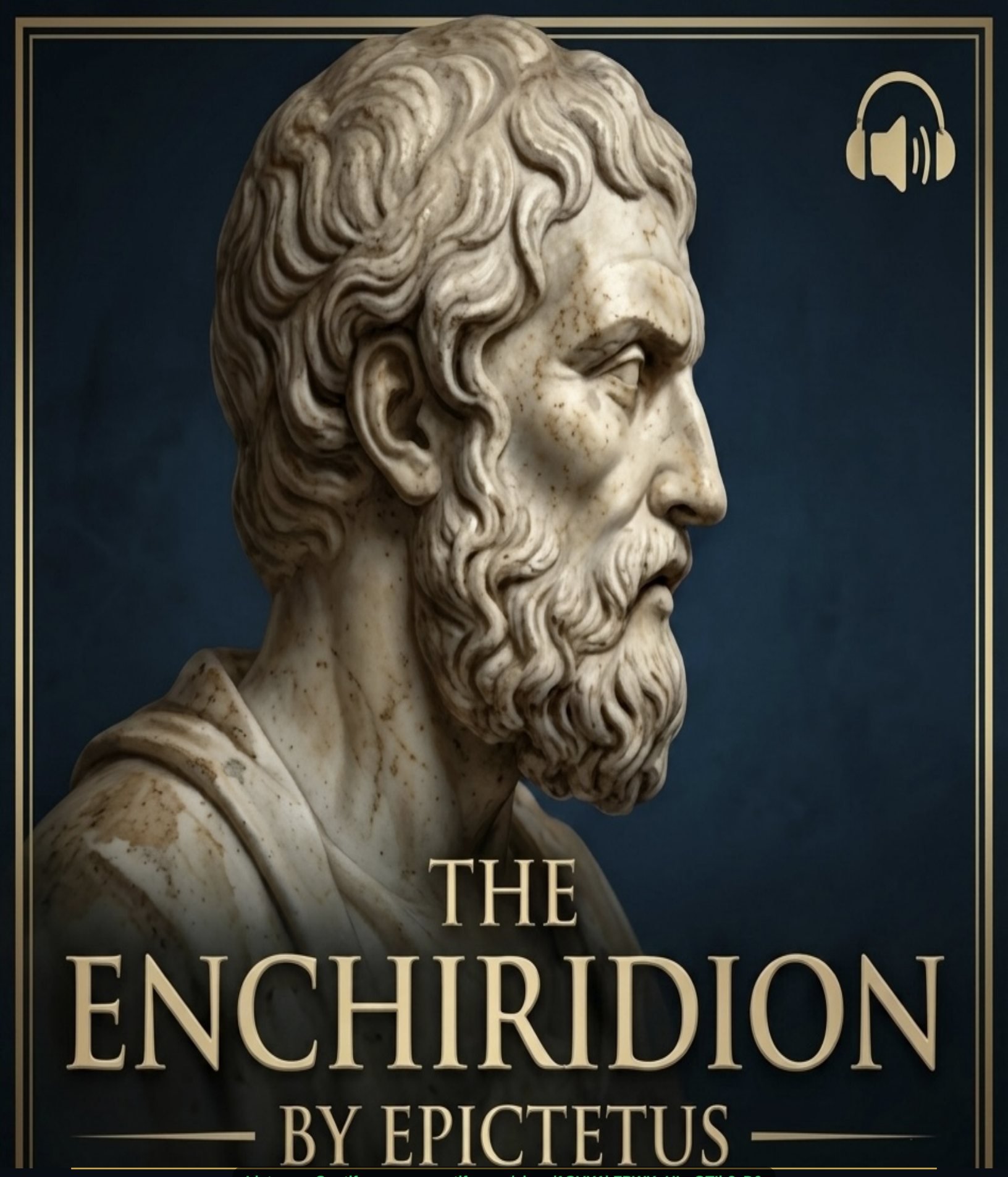

THE ENCHIRIDION

BY EPICTETUS

Listen on Spotify • open.spotify.com/show/1GVK1kFPWKeULnGTIb3zD0

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL • AUDIOBOOK COMPANION

Who Was Epictetus • The 53 Sections • Core Teachings • Edition Notes

JAGALI LLC • Jagali Classics, Vol. 3

WHO WAS EPICTETUS?

The enslaved philosopher whose teachings shaped an emperor

Born Into Slavery (c. 50 CE)

Epictetus was born in Hierapolis, Phrygia (modern-day Turkey), into slavery. His name in Greek simply means 'acquired' — the name given to an enslaved person, not a free one. He was brought to Rome as the property of Epaphroditus, a powerful freedman and secretary to Emperor Nero. This is not background detail. It is the foundation of everything he taught: a man who owned nothing, not even his own name, built the most rigorous philosophy of inner freedom the ancient world produced.

Student of Musonius Rufus

While enslaved in Rome, Epictetus was permitted to study under Musonius Rufus, one of the leading Stoic teachers of the era. How this arrangement came about is not recorded, but it changed the course of Western philosophy. Rufus taught that philosophy was not an intellectual exercise but a daily practice — a view Epictetus absorbed completely and transmitted to every student he ever taught.

Freed, Then Exiled (c. 68–93 CE)

Epictetus was freed sometime after Nero's death, likely in his late twenties or thirties. He established a school of philosophy in Rome and began teaching publicly. In 93 CE, Emperor Domitian expelled all philosophers from Rome — a political purge that Epictetus met with characteristic equanimity. He relocated to Nicopolis in northwestern Greece, where he founded a new school that attracted students from across the Roman world, including wealthy aristocrats and eventually the future Emperor Hadrian.

He Wrote Nothing

Epictetus left no writings of his own. Everything we have comes from notes taken by his student Arrian of Nicomedia, who compiled them into two works: the Discourses (four books of extended lectures) and the Enchiridion — Greek for 'handbook' or 'that which is held in the hand.' The Enchiridion is a distillation of the Discourses: 53 short passages, some a single sentence, some a paragraph, covering the core of Epictetus's teaching. Arrian intended it as a portable field manual for the practicing Stoic.

His Influence

Marcus Aurelius quotes and paraphrases Epictetus throughout the Meditations, calling him the teacher who most shaped his thinking. In the 17th century, the Enchiridion was one of the most printed books in Europe. In the 20th century, American POW and later Vice Presidential candidate James Stockdale memorized it before being shot down over Vietnam — and credited it with his survival of seven years in Hanoi. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, developed in the 1960s, is built on a premise lifted almost verbatim from Enchiridion section 5: it is not events that disturb us, but our judgments about them.

His Death (c. 135 CE)

Epictetus died in Nicopolis, probably in his eighties, having lived simply and without possessions his entire free life. He was said to have owned only a straw mat, a lamp, and an iron lamp-stand — the lamp-stand was sold at auction after his death for a very high price, purchased by someone who wanted to own something Epictetus had touched. He would have found this absurd.

THE ENCHIRIDION — 53 SECTIONS AT A GLANCE

A thematic map of Epictetus's handbook

The Enchiridion has no chapters in the modern sense — only 53 numbered sections of varying length. Some are a single sentence; some run to several paragraphs. They are not arranged by topic but by the flow of a teacher's thought. The groupings below are editorial, to help orient the listener.

THE DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL — Sections 1–2

§1
The foundational distinction of all Stoic practice: some things are up to us (opinions, desires, actions), some are not (body, reputation, property, outcomes). Freedom begins with knowing the difference.

§2
Desire and aversion applied to the dichotomy. Want only what is within your power; fear only what is within your power to avoid. Wanting what you cannot control is the source of all disturbance.

ROLES & RELATIONSHIPS — Sections 17, 24–26, 30–33

§17
You are an actor in a play. The Author has assigned your role — short or long, a beggar or a king. Your job is to play it well, not to choose it.

§24–26
On envy, ambition, and the desire for things beyond your station. Do not crave what others have. Each advantage comes with its price.

§30–33
On duties toward parents, siblings, country, and gods. Piety consists in holding correct opinions and acting in accordance with nature.

APPEARANCES & JUDGMENT — Sections 5–6, 16, 20

§5
The most-cited line in the Enchiridion: 'Men are disturbed not by things, but by their opinions about things.' The foundation of what would become CBT.

§6
Do not be proud of any advantage that is not your own. If a horse were proud of its beauty, that would be fine — it is the horse's. But you taking pride in it is absurd.

§16–20
On illness, death, loss of property, and exile: these things are not bad in themselves. It is the opinion that they are bad that disturbs us. Practice saying: 'This is nothing to me.'

SOCIAL CONDUCT — Sections 13–15, 22, 23, 33–46

§13–15
Do not claim to be a philosopher. Act like one. Avoid gossip about gladiators, athletes, horses, food, and drink — these conversations achieve nothing.

§22–23
If someone tells you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not defend yourself. Say only: 'He did not know my other faults, or he would have said more.'

§33–46
Practical rules for daily life: how to behave at dinner parties, in conversation, at the games, in the company of powerful people, when insulted.

DEATH & IMPERMANENCE — Sections 3, 11, 21

§3
In every person or thing you love, remember its nature. If you love a cup, remember it is a cup and can be broken. Then you will not be disturbed when it breaks.

§11
Never say of anything 'I have lost it,' but say 'I have returned it.' Your child died: it was returned. Your estate was taken: it was returned. Give back what is not yours without resentment.

§21
Let death and exile and everything that appears terrible be before your eyes every day. Then you will never think of anything base, and you will never desire anything excessively.

CORE TEACHINGS

The ideas that run through every section of the Enchiridion

The Dichotomy of Control

The most important idea in all of Epictetus. Everything in the universe falls into one of two categories: what is up to us (eph' hemin) and what is not up to us (ouk eph' hemin). Up to us: our opinions, impulses, desires, aversions — in short, our own actions. Not up to us: our body, our reputation, our property, political office, and in short, whatever is not our own action. The entire practice of Stoicism is the daily application of this distinction. If something upsets you, ask first: is this in my control? If not, your disturbance is a choice you are making.

The Discipline of Desire

Epictetus divides mental training into three disciplines. The first is desire and aversion: wanting only what is within your power, fearing only what is within your power to avoid. To desire something external — wealth, health, the approval of others — is to set yourself up for guaranteed disturbance, because all external things can be taken from you. The Stoic does not eliminate desire; she redirects it entirely toward virtue, the one thing no one can take.

The Discipline of Action

The second discipline concerns how we act in the world — our impulses and actions toward others. Epictetus teaches that we should act with a 'reservation clause': pursue your goals, fulfill your roles, act for the common good — but always with the understanding that circumstances may intervene. 'I will go to the market, unless something prevents me.' This is not passivity; it is the elimination of frustration when plans fail.

The Discipline of Assent

The third and most advanced discipline is the governance of judgment itself — how we respond to the impressions (phantasiai) that arise in the mind. When something happens, an initial impression arises before we have thought about it. The Stoic's task is to pause before assenting to that impression — to examine it, test it, and accept or reject it deliberately. 'It is not things that disturb us, but our judgments about things.' (Section 5) This is the discipline that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy most directly inherited.

Playing Your Role

Epictetus uses the metaphor of an actor throughout the Enchiridion. Life is a play; the Author (God, or Nature, or the Logos) has assigned each person a role. Your job is not to choose the role — you cannot — but to play it as well as possible. A short role played well is better than a long role played badly. This applies to every circumstance of life: you did not choose your body, your family, your era, your station. You choose only how you occupy them.

Relationship to Others

A common misunderstanding of Stoicism is that it counsels emotional detachment from the people we love. Epictetus explicitly rejects this. We have duties toward parents, siblings, children, and fellow citizens — and we should fulfill them fully. The Stoic does not stop loving; she holds her love with open hands rather than clenched fists. 'If you kiss your child, your brother, your friend, do not add to the impression all that it might become — and if he dies, you shall bear it.' This is not coldness. It is love without the terror of loss.

NOTES ON THIS EDITION

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Source Text

This audiobook uses the public domain translation of the Enchiridion by Elizabeth Carter (1758), as made available through Project Gutenberg. The translation is in the public domain in the United States. The original text was composed in Greek by Arrian of Nicomedia, recording the lectures of Epictetus, probably in the early 2nd century CE.

Translator

Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806) was one of the most accomplished scholars of 18th-century England. Her translation of Epictetus, published in 1758, remained the standard English edition for over a century and is still widely read for its clarity and faithfulness to the Greek. She was celebrated by Samuel Johnson, who said that she could make a pudding as well as translate Epictetus.

Narration

The narration was produced using AI voice synthesis technology. This production is disclosed as AI-narrated on all distribution platforms in compliance with distributor requirements. The narrator pseudonym 'Digital Voice — Lilly' is used to clearly signal the synthetic nature of the audio.

Supplemental Material

The biography, section guide, and core teachings contained in this PDF were written by Jagali LLC for this edition. They draw on historical scholarship in the public domain and are original editorial work of this edition.

A Note on the Title

Enchiridion is a Greek word meaning 'that which is held in the hand' — a handbook or manual. Arrian chose the title deliberately: this was not meant to be read once and shelved, but carried and consulted daily, the way a soldier carries a weapon. The word also appears in Greek to mean a short sword or dagger — a tool for close-quarters use. Both meanings are apt.

◆ ◆ ◆

“Make the best use of what is in your power, and take the rest as it happens.” — Epictetus

Listen on Spotify • open.spotify.com/show/1GVK1kFPWKeULnGTIb3zD0